Nonmetro Population Rebound: Still Real but Diminishing

From 1995 to 1997, population growth in nonmetro America fell from its pace of the preceding 2 years, while metro growth held steady. Yet, rural and small-town areas continued to see some net inmovement of people. Counties where minorities have the greatest concentration diverged from the overall nometro growth pace, either toward faster growth in Native American and Hispanic areas or slower change in Black areas.

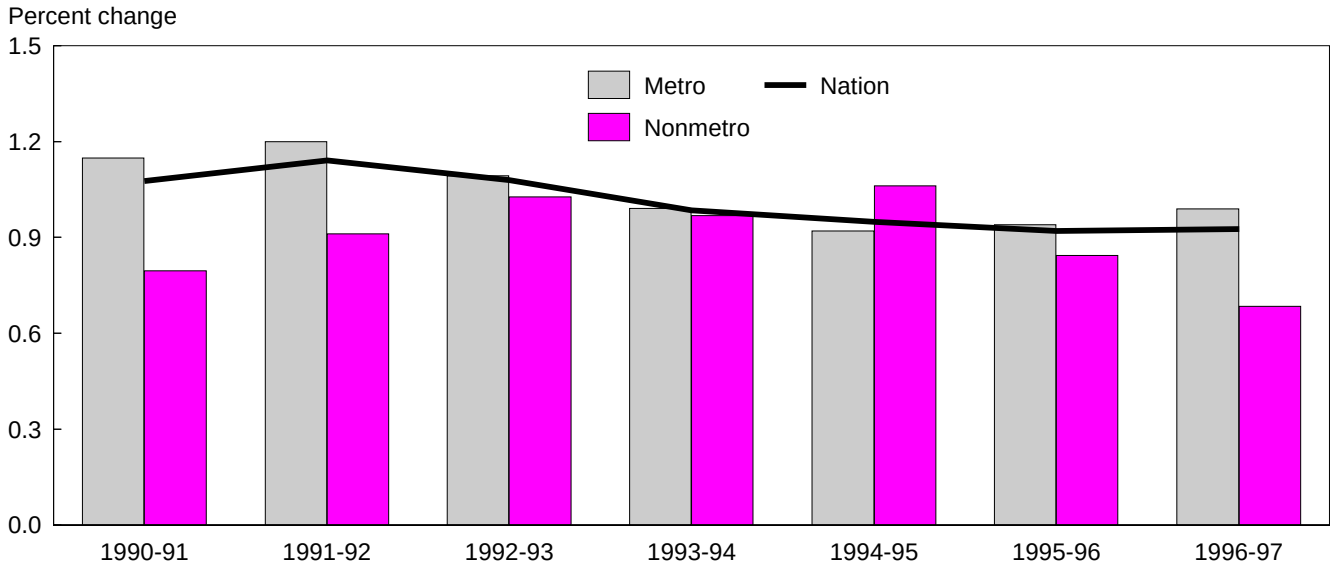
The major demographic news for rural and small-town America in the 1990's has been the rebound of population growth and the resumed net inmovement of newcomers from metro areas. Almost three-fourths of all nonmetro counties grew in population from 1990 to 1997, whereas only half did so in the 1980's. And the great majority of the growing counties (seven-eighths) derived some or all of their increase from inmovement of former metro residents and/or foreign immigrants. This is a far cry from the conventional pattern of the past and of the 1980's, when rural communities were viewed as places of chronic exodus to the cities.

In the most recent period—July 1, 1995, to July 1, 1997—however, nonmetro growth slowed somewhat, with fewer counties having population increase and net inmigration than in the first half of the decade. Part of this slowdown corresponds with a modest reduction in growth rate of the U.S. population as a whole since the early 1990's, but more of it derives from a slackened pace of nonmetro growth relative to that in metro areas. For just 1 year, 1994-95, nonmetro areas grew more rapidly than metro areas, but since then nonmetro growth has fallen by a third while metro growth has risen slightly (fig.1).

Yet it is equally important to note that the slower nonmetro growth of 1995-97 still exceeded that obtained from natural increase alone (that is, surplus of births over deaths) and continued to depend on significant net inmigration. Of the nonmetro population gain in those 2 years, about 400,000 out of 800,000 came from inmovement of people from metro areas and another 100,000 from foreign immigration.

The causes of the slowdown cannot be stated definitively, as many people who have moved into rural and small-town places have done so for noneconomic, quality-of-life reasons, the changing strength of which is not readily measured by available indicators. It is clear, though, that the somewhat more than half of nonmetro counties that do not adjoin metro areas (and thus are more on their own economically) have been the most affected.

Figure 1
Annual population growth rates for metro counties, nonmetro counties, and the Nation, 1990-97
Nonmetro growth has fallen since 1995, while metro growth has edged upward



Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the Bureau of the Census.

Just 58 percent of them grew in population during 1995-97 compared with 69.5 percent during 1993-95. By comparison, 78 percent of metro-adjacent counties grew during 1995-97, just a minor drop from 80.5 percent during 1993-95. The disproportionate post-1995 falloff in growth in counties not adjacent to metro areas also means that this change was very noticeable among farming-dependent counties, for they constitute many of the more remote counties. By 1995-97, slightly less than half of the farming-dependent group (49 percent) were still increasing.

The recent downward shift in nonmetro population change is consistent with trends in employment. For the 2-year period 1995-97, nonmetro employment rose just 1.8 percent after an increase of 4.5 percent in the previous 2 years. In contrast, metro areas showed no drop in employment growth during this time. Employment in counties not adjacent to metro areas rose by just 1.5 percent, barely a third of the 4.4-percent rise in the previous 2 years. In counties adjacent to metro areas, the rate fell to 2.0 percent from an earlier 4.6 percent during the peak recovery period from the early 1990's recession.

Western Growth Still Leads the Country

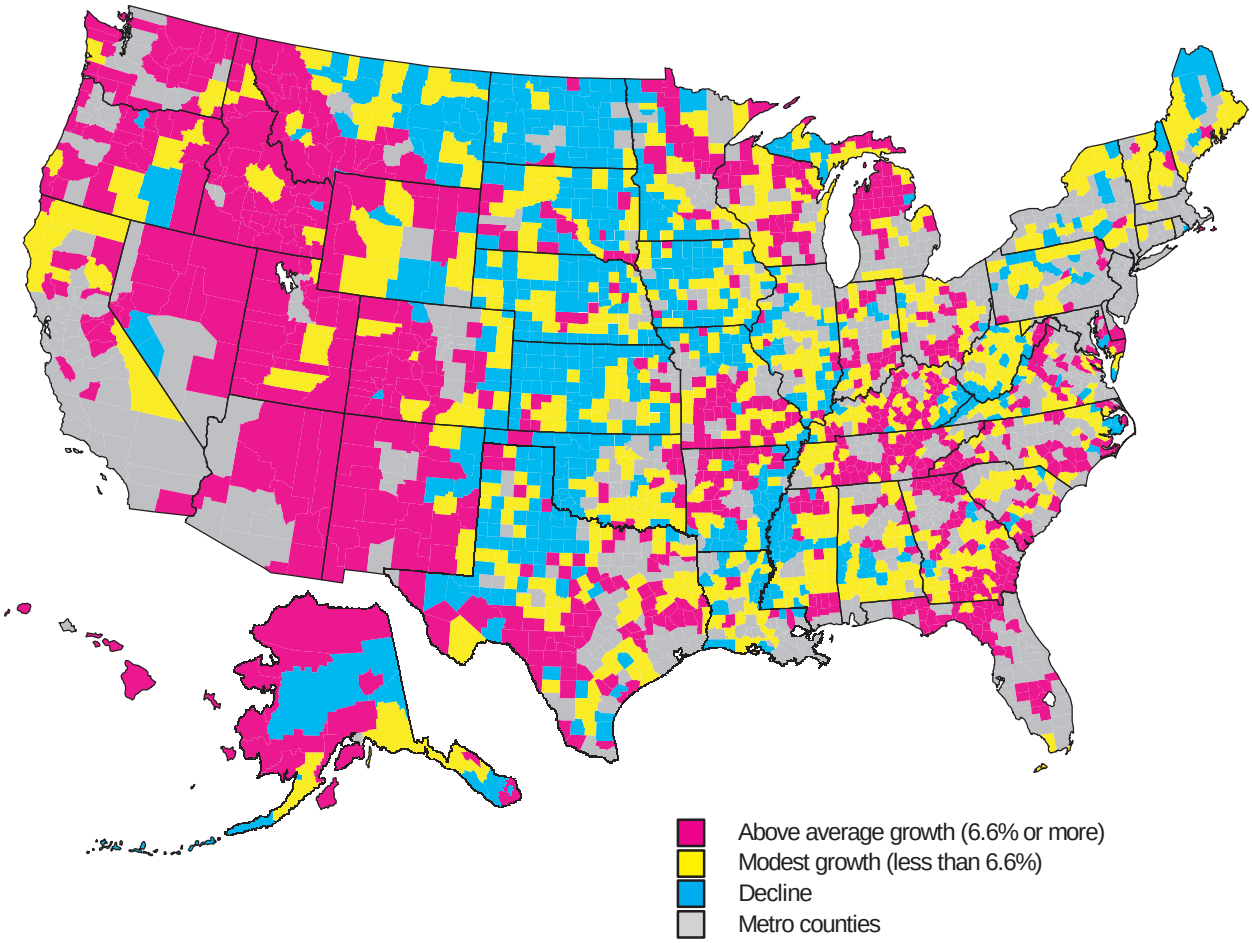
The pace of rural and small-town population change in the West continues to far outstrip that in other regions, with 15-percent growth since 1990, a rate triple that of the rest of the country (table 1 and fig. 2). Growth, supported by extensive inmigration, has been almost universal from the Rocky Mountain Front Range to the Pacific Coast. The nonmetro growth rate in the West exceeds that in the metro population of the region, a major change from the 1980's. Much of this increase seems attributable to people moving into the Mountain West for nonpecuniary reasons, whether they remain employed or are retired. The Northeast is a second region where nonmetro areas have the higher growth

Table 1
Regional population change, 1980-97
The West and South dominate nonmetro population growth

	Population			Change		Net migration rate		Net migration rate	
Region	1997	1990	1980	1990-97	1980-90	1990-97	1980-90	1990-97	1980-90
	Thousands			Percent		Thousands		Percent	
United States	267,636	248,765	224,930	7.6	10.6	6,151	5,274	2.5	2.3
Nonmetro	54,276	50,904	49,398	6.6	3.0	2,043	-1,373	4.0	-2.8
Metro	213,360	197,861	175,532	7.8	12.7	4,108	6,647	2.1	3.8
Northeast	51,588	50,828	49,137	1.5	3.4	-1,112	-612	-2.2	-1.2
Nonmetro	5,402	5,267	5,018	2.6	5.0	30	45	.6	.9
Metro	46,187	45,561	44,119	1.4	3.3	-1,142	-657	-2.5	-1.5
Midwest	62,460	59,669	58,867	4.7	1.4	278	-3,050	.5	-5.2
Nonmetro	16,571	15,978	16,310	3.7	-2.0	310	-1,047	1.9	-6.4
Metro	45,890	43,691	42,557	5.0	2.7	-33	-2,003	-.1	-4.7
South	94,187	85,456	73,755	10.2	15.9	4,564	4,282	5.3	5.8
Nonmetro	23,893	22,360	21,554	6.9	3.7	982	-461	4.4	-2.1
Metro	70,294	63,095	52,201	11.4	20.9	3,582	4,743	5.7	9.1
West	59,400	52,812	43,171	12.5	22.3	2,421	4,654	4.6	10.8
Nonmetro	8,410	7,299	6,516	15.2	12.0	720	90.0	9.9	1.4
Metro	50,990	45,513	36,655	12.0	24.2	1,701	4,564	3.7	12.5

Note: See appendix for definitions of regions.
Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the Bureau of the Census

Figure 2
Nonmetro population change, 1990-97
Wide geographic variation still prevails



Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the Bureau of the Census.

rate, but in great contrast to the West, both metro and nonmetro populations are growing at a very slow pace, below that of the 1980's. In this respect, the Northeast is unique in not having any nonmetro demographic rebound in the 1990's.

In both the Midwest and the South, poor economic conditions in the 1980's were accompanied by extensive outmigration of rural and small-town people, even to the point of outright regional population decline in the Midwest. These regions have shifted to moderate and more widespread increases, with net inmovement in the 1990's thus far. This generalization has notable exceptions, though. The Great Plains portion of each region continues to have large areas of loss, as do many parts of the Corn Belt, the Mississippi Delta, and the Southern Coal Fields. But such losses are now usually modest. They have been more than offset by growth nodes, such as the Ozarks, the Upper Great Lakes, the Southern Blue Ridge Mountains, anywhere in Florida, and areas tributary to such metropolises as Washington, Atlanta, Nashville, or Houston.

County Functions Remain Linked to Demographic Change

In this decade, counties that can be described as retirement destinations have consistently outrun all others in their rate of population gain (app. table 4). Such counties number

just 8 percent of all nonmetro counties, but with a growth rate two and a half to three times as high as other counties, they have acquired 30 percent of total nonmetro growth since 1990. They have not been exempt from the reduced growth that has affected all types of nonmetro counties since 1995, but have retained their pace more so than most others, and they are the only type to continue averaging better than 2.0-percent increase annually. It needs to be stressed that the retirement areas are very attractive to people of younger ages as well, for these areas often have natural or other amenities of general appeal. Their population under age 65 rose by 19 percent from 1990-97, almost as high as the 20-percent growth for people 65 and over.

The greatest consistency in very recent trends compared with those in 1993-95 has been among manufacturing counties and commuting counties. Areas specialized in manufacturing at the beginning of the decade have the largest population (16.7 million) of any of the types defined by ERS, with three-tenths of the entire nonmetro population. Their growth rate has been steadily at or near the national nonmetro average, and from 1995 to 1997, their growth was 86 percent of the 1990-95 rate. They have seldom been a source of major growth in the 1990's, but neither have they been subject to the declines incurred by so many farming or mining areas. The commuting counties (about a fifth of which are also manufacturing areas) presumably have sustained their growth levels since 1995 because so many draw new residents from nearby metro areas.

Farming and mining-dependent counties, which already had the lowest aggregate population growth rates in the first half of the 1990's, have been the most strongly affected by the downturn in nonmetro growth since 1995. In the mining counties, the increase from 1995 to 1997 was just 40 percent of the rate of 1993-95, and the farm counties slipped to a rate just 63 percent of that of the prior 2 years. Both county types have been focused on industries undergoing employment loss from improved labor productivity, and, in the case of mining, from local depletion of marketable reserves. But we do not know of specific events during 1995-97 that may have triggered such a reduction in population growth, other than the improved state of the metro economy, which may have attracted residents of the farming and mining counties, and increased retention of people in metro areas in general.

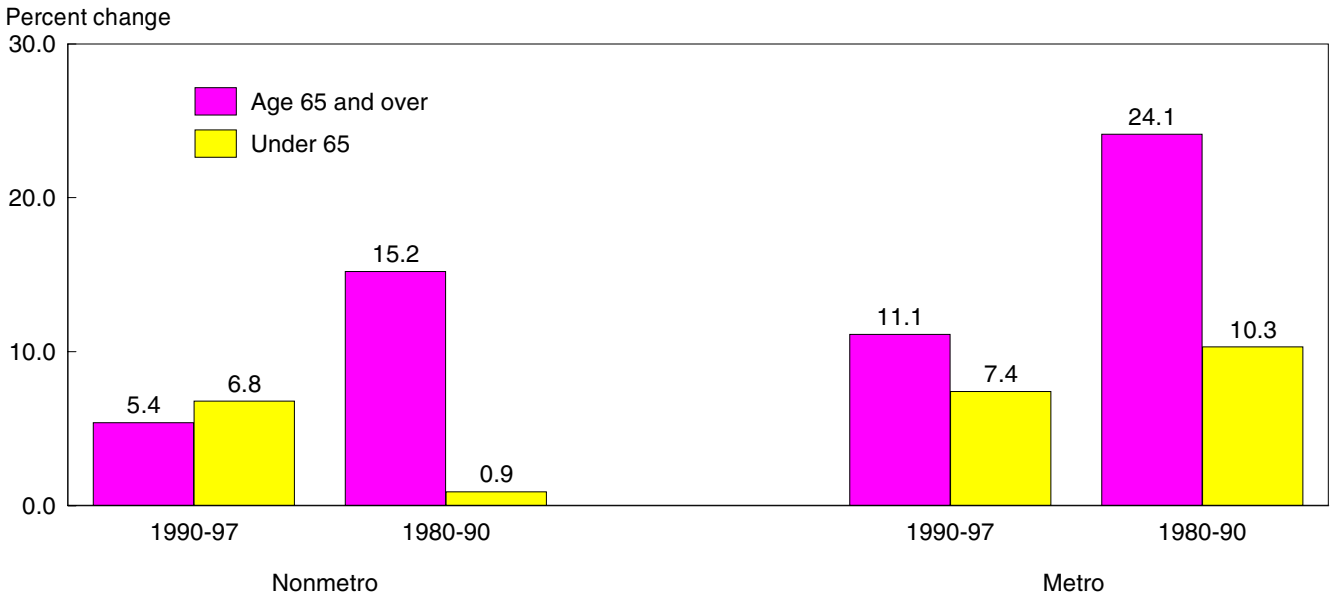
Nearly a fourth of nonmetro counties have had persistently high incidence of poverty, with 20 percent or more of the population poor in each of the last four censuses, 1960-90. As a class, these counties grew in population by 5.5 percent during 1990-97. Although this is a rate of increase below that of all other counties, it still involved net inmigration in a majority of cases. Thus, high local poverty has not necessarily been a barrier to retaining residents and attracting newcomers in this decade. In some cases, recent population growth in these areas has been accompanied by equal or higher income increases; in other instances, it has not.

Growth of Older Population Slows and in Many Places Ends

We noted in the 1997 socioeconomic conditions issue of *RCaT* that the number of people aged 65 and over in nonmetro areas was no longer increasing as rapidly as the population below that age, and that this was in distinct contrast with the metro population. This trend has continued, despite the concurrent rapid inmovement of older people—many from metro places—into nonmetro retirement counties. From 1990 to 1997, the older nonmetro population rose by just 5.4 percent, compared with a 6.8-percent increase among those under 65 (fig. 3), despite a substantial influx of older metro retirees into a number of nonmetro counties. A closer look shows that this pattern first occurred in the July 1, 1992-July 1, 1993, period and has widened since.

The provisional 1997 estimates reveal outright declines of older persons in over 900 nonmetro counties since 1990, an increase of more than 90 counties just since 1996. In farming-dependent counties, the total number of older people has fallen in all but 1 year since 1993, and in mining counties, the number fell for the first time in 1997. The proportion of the population at age 65 and over in the farming counties slipped from 16.9 percent in 1990 to 16.1 percent in 1997, a drop remarkable not so much for the amount of decline but for

Figure 3
Growth of population 65 years and over and under 65, 1980-97
During the 1990's, the nonmetro older population has grown more slowly than in metro areas and during the 1980's



Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the Bureau of the Census.

the fact that it happened at all, given the common image of farm-dependent areas as places of ever-rising age. But the trend has not been limited to very rural counties. Many areas that have small cities and that function as trade and service centers for agricultural districts or have manufacturing dependence have also shown a drop in persons 65 and over.

Persons reaching age 65 in 1997 were born in 1932, during the heart of the Great Depression, when the birth rate was nearly at its lowest. This fact contributes to a slowing of the increase in the number of older people everywhere. But, the current declines in elderly population in hundreds of rural counties are believed to reflect the extensive outmovement of young adults from these counties in earlier decades at the peak of the decline in number of farms. Such cohorts were sufficiently depleted from this process that they are now too small to fully replace deaths of older people. Outmigration of persons of retirement age from farming counties adds to the trend, but is not a new factor. The current widespread slow growth or decrease in nonmetro older population will almost certainly moderate or end when the “baby boomers” begin to enter old age after 2006. Then increasingly after 2011, both the number and proportion of nonmetro elderly should rise as the largest cohorts of “baby boomers” reach 65.

Minority Counties Vary from National Patterns of Nonmetro Change

Data are not available to estimate reliably the current population of minorities in most counties. But all of the principal minorities have a continued degree of geographic concentration, based on historical settlement patterns. Thus, it is informative to determine current overall trends in the areas where they are relatively most numerous.

As a whole, nonmetro counties with large percentages of Black residents have had either modest population increases in the 1990's or declines. Their overall change was just 1.1 percent in majority Black counties and 4.2 percent in those where between a third and a half of residents were Black in 1990 (table 2). Such counties are almost all found in the Southern Coastal Plain, from Virginia to Texas. Local economies have been more sup-

portive of population retention in those areas of the Atlantic States than in those of the Gulf South.

In the counties of the Mississippi Delta that have large Black minorities, modest population decline continues to be the dominant pattern. These prime agricultural areas are all classed as places of persistent high poverty and have yet to develop sufficient alternatives to farm-related work. Delta counties in which Blacks comprised a third or more of the population experienced 33,000 net outmigration of people during 1990-97, whereas all other Black counties in the South collectively had about 32,000 net inmovement. The Delta counties are a major exception to the more common pattern elsewhere of at least moderate growth and inmigration in persistent-poverty areas. Natural increase from births in the Black-inhabited areas of the rural South is still above that of heavily White areas, but is reduced from the past and much below that prevalent in other minority counties (fig. 4).

The predominantly American Indian or Alaskan Native counties have increased in population by 13.7 percent since 1990, a rate far above the national average. In most of these areas, the Native American proportion of the total rose between 1980 and 1990, and this trend is thought likely to have continued in the 1990's. In absolute numbers, the largest populations in the counties with Indian predominance are those of the Navajo and other tribes in the Four Corners region of the Southwest, plus the Sioux and other reservation groups of the Northern Plains. Such areas have high rates of growth from natural increase (averaging over 13 percent for 1990-97) that result from their young age structure and larger-than-average families. By contrast, in the nonmetro United States as a whole, natural increase provided just 2.6 percent growth. The Indian and Alaskan Native areas have collectively lacked any significant population change from net migration since 1990. This near balance between in- and outmovement follows a period of substantial exodus during the 1980's.

Table 2

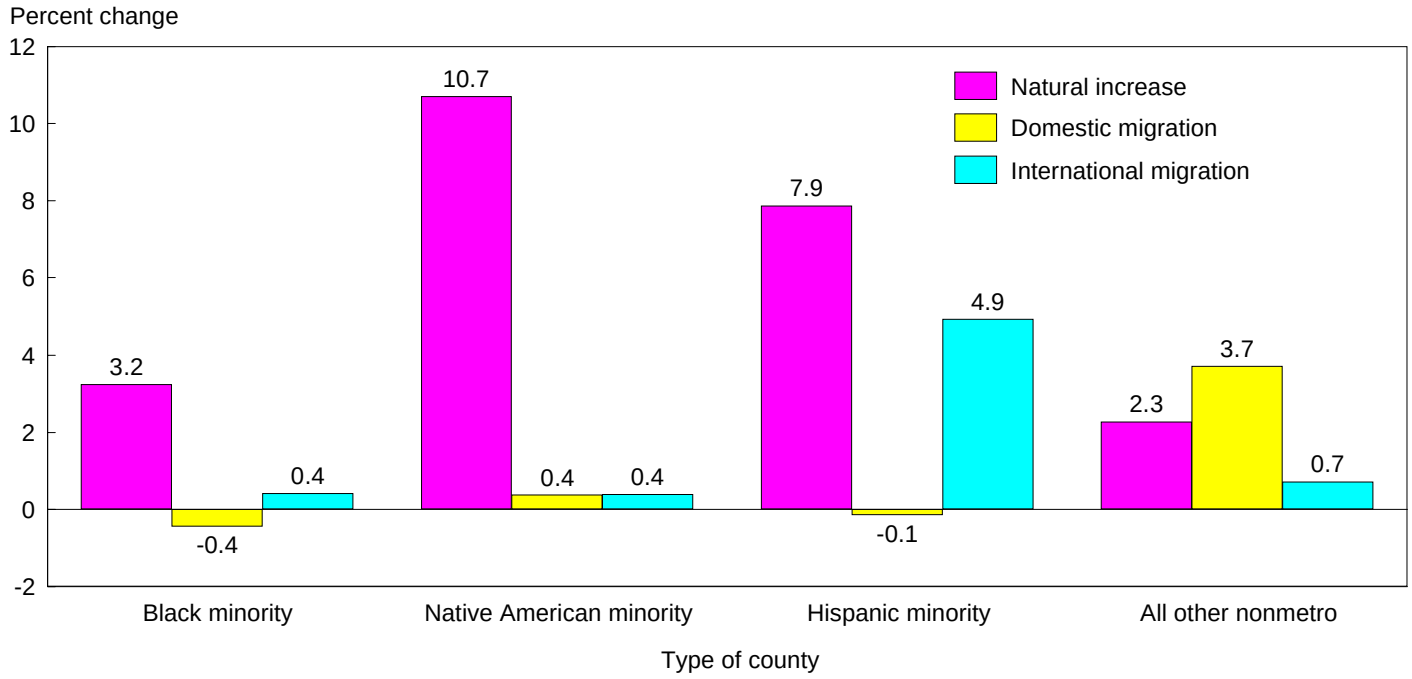
Nonmetro areas' population change, by 1990 ethnic composition, 1980-97

Areas with minority population concentrations participate in rebound

	Population			Change		Net migration		Net migration rate	
County type	1997	1990	1980	1990-97	1980-90	1990-97	1980-90	1990-97	1980-90
	Thousands			Percent		Thousands		Percent	
All nonmetro counties	54,276	50,904	49,398	6.6	3.0	2,043	-1,373	4.0	-2.8
Black:									
50.0 percent or more	1,361	1,347	1,408	1.1	-4	-33	-170	-2.5	-12.1
33.3 - 49.9 percent	3,018	2,896	2,860	4.2	1.3	32	-148	1.1	-5.2
Under 33.3 percent	49,897	46,661	45,131	6.9	3.4	2,044	-1,055	4.4	-2.3
Native American:									
50.0 percent or more	385	338	301	13.7	12	1	-37	.3	-12.3
33.3 - 49.9 percent	323	296	287	8.9	3.1	4	-30	1.3	-10.5
Under 33.3 percent	53,569	50,270	48,809	6.6	3.0	2,038	-1,306	4.1	-2.7
Hispanic:									
50.0 percent or more	796	683	615	16.5	11	45	-23	6.6	-3.7
33.3 - 49.9 percent	808	741	718	9.0	3.1	22	-53	3.0	-7.4
Under 33.3 percent	52,673	49,480	48,065	6.5	2.9	1,975	-1,297	4.0	-2.7

Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the Bureau of the Census.

Figure 4
Population change of nonmetro minority counties, by source, 1990-97
Growth comes largely from natural increase in minority counties and from migration elsewhere



Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the Bureau of the Census.

In a manner similar to the pattern of other minorities, areas with one-third to one-half Native American composition had an overall growth rate that was intermediate between those with lower representation and those where the group was a majority.

The nonmetro Hispanic heartland has been in the basin of the Rio Grande, from southern Colorado to the gulf coast. All told, predominantly Hispanic counties grew in population by 16.5 percent during 1990-97, double the national nonmetro pace. Those with a third to a half of the population Hispanic had somewhat slower growth of 9.0 percent. More so than the Black or Native American populations, Hispanics have been rapidly developing other nodes of nonmetro settlement, thus increasing the number of communities where they comprise a significant portion of the population or will do so shortly. This has been true in the High Plains of Texas, where the development of irrigated farming, along with oil and gas work, drew them in during the last half century. In a 20-county bloc of such counties, Hispanics exceeded a third of the population by 1990. Total population levels there have been nearly static or declining since 1990, reflecting falling employment in farming and mining, and contrasting with other Hispanic areas. All of the Texas High Plains counties have had domestic net outmigration in the 1990's. But, all of them have had foreign immigration, thought to be largely Mexican, and the Hispanic proportions are believed to be still rising.

Perhaps the best-known recent instances of further Hispanic deconcentration have occurred in the Farm Belt following the opening of meat slaughtering and processing plants that require large numbers of low-wage workers not available locally. Often the majority of these workers are Hispanics, both native-born and immigrant. Their numbers do not reach high proportions yet, but over time, many seem likely to settle permanently and go into other occupations. Some well-known cases are Storm Lake, IA; Garden City, KA; and Lexington, NE.

The Hispanic counties as a group have more immigration than the Black or Native American areas. In fact, of the 69,000 total net inmovement to Hispanic minority counties, 99 percent of it resulted from immigration. These counties acquired a third of all foreign immigrants to nonmetro America, despite having just 3 percent of the total nonmetro population. A majority of the immigration to the Hispanic counties occurred in those that directly border Mexico. An equal amount of growth stemmed from natural increase, which is well above the national average, but not as much as that of Native Americans.

The central features of nonmetro demographic change in counties with large proportions of minorities can be summarized as follows:

- Such areas have participated in the 1990's rural rebound on the whole, with higher rates of population growth than seen in the 1980's, and a shift from net outmigration to inmovement in most cases.

- The components of change for the three types of minority areas vary. Hispanic areas have grown from both high natural increase and foreign immigration.

- Native American areas have grown from high natural increase also, but with negligible inmovement to supplement it.

- Black areas have largely ended their heavy outmigration of the past, except in the Delta, but are growing at only a low-to-moderate pace from natural increase. *[Calvin Beale, 202-694-5416, cbeale@econ.ag.gov]*